

Reflection for the Nineteenth Sunday of the Church's Year

Two towering figures from the Bible are put before us today, united by a spectacular collapse of faith in the face of adversity. And in both cases, this collapse is all the more surprising because both Elijah and Peter have just shown exceptional demonstrations of their faith. While we only have snippets of their stories in our readings today, they are put before us to encourage and challenge us when our own faith is faltering or feels near to collapse. Let us look at their two stories in turn.

Elijah is a prophet during the reign of the weak king, Ahab. Ahab had married the pagan queen Jezebel who persuaded him to abandon the living God in favour of her own false gods known as the Baals. Because of this, through Elijah the prophet, God announced a three-year drought and harvest failure. The situation became desperate – but, through it all, God had cared for Elijah. Then, after three years of desperation Elijah summoned the four hundred and fifty false prophets of the Baals to a religious challenge on Mount Carmel. They would call on their false gods and he would call on the living God to set fire to a sacrificial bull to see who would answer their calls. The four hundred and fifty prophets of the Baals call on their false gods to no avail, but Elijah calls on the living God who answers by fire. He then rounds up the false prophets and has them killed and at this point the three-year drought comes to a spectacular end. One would have expected Elijah's faith to be rock solid at this point and for Elijah to feel on the crest of a wave. However, Jezebel was furious, and when she vows to have Elijah killed within the day, Elijah's faith suddenly collapses and panic sets in. He flees to the mountains to take refuge in a cave which is where our first reading picks him up today.

Turning to Peter. He first met Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and in a spontaneous act of faith he had left everything and followed him. He had witnessed many healing miracles, including that of his own mother-in-law, and, immediately before the episode in today's gospel, he had been there when Jesus had fed the five thousand with five barley loaves and two fish. His faith should have been rock solid at this point. And perhaps Peter thought it was! But when Jesus came at the dead of night to the disciples in the boat battling a rough sea, they thought they were seeing a ghost *"and cried out in fear."* Peter asks for a sign, *"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."* But when commanded to do so, his faith collapses and he was afraid and began to sink. God reassures Elijah of his presence when he passes by the opening of the cave *"in the sound of a low whisper."* Jesus re-assures Peter *"when he reached out his hand and took hold of him."* Two men of great faith. Two collapses of their faith. Two re-assurances of God's presence.

We would be foolish to think that our faith was stronger than that of Elijah or Peter. In the face of the cares and struggles of life we may feel our faith to be faltering or virtually non-existent. But it is then that we should be mindful of the two stories put before us in the scriptures today.